

# Entering His Presence: The Holiness of Prayer

Published by UpWords Ministries  
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## Introduction

*I will bring these people to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer (Is. 56:7).*

In the court of King Xerxes, entering the king's presence without permission carried a penalty of death for the offender. This law was not lightly taken by the people of Persia. But, in order to save her people, Queen Esther collected her courage and approached the throne. The king accepted her without rebuke, granted her request, and a nation survived.

It's a beautiful story of boldness spurred by devotion. And, though King Xerxes wasn't too bad (as biblical rulers go), aren't you glad our heavenly king rules his throne room differently?

Aren't you glad God is more accessible than Xerxes? What if we could go to God in prayer only when he called us? What if we needed an official guard to announce our presence?

Suppose only certain people could pray. Suppose only specified topics could be discussed.

Doesn't sound like the throne room of our heavenly King, does it? Instead of limited accessibility, our King is always available, eternally ready to hear his people, and continually waiting for us to approach.

In fact, no moment brings greater delight to the King than when his children enter his presence.

## Glimpsing the Throne Room

You walk through the halls of a magnificent royal court. As you reach the entrance of the throne room, you peer through the doorway and see the king on his spectacular throne. Royal guards are posted along the wall and sentries stand at the door. But they do not stop you as you walk. They ask for no credentials or letters of introduction. You need not register with the king's aide. There is no protocol that must be observed. For, as you enter the throne room, you say the word which brings the king rushing to you.

"Abba."

He is your father.

Just as Jesus prayed "Our father who is in heaven. . ." (Mt. 6:9) so do we address the heavenly king as father. When Jesus used the term *abba*, he changed forever the relationship between man and God. The concept of addressing God as "Abba, father" was revolutionary, because of the intimacy implied by the word itself. In the days of Christ, *abba* was a term of endearment used by children, much like "daddy" in our culture. Though God is described as a father in the Old Testament, the use of the more familiar term doesn't appear until Jesus uses it himself. Scholar Joachim Jeremias explains the impact of its unusual change in usage:

*"Abba" was an everyday word. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner; yet Jesus did it always in all his prayers which are handed down to us, with one single exception: the cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the Lord's prayer, Jesus authorizes his disciples to repeat the word 'abba' after him. He gives them a share in his sonship. He empowers them as his disciples to speak with their heavenly father in just such a familiar and trusting way.*

Why do we have instant access to the throne of God? Because the throne is occupied by our father. *The Father loves us so much that we are called children of God. And we really are his children* (1 Jn. 3:1).

God is the ideal father. Though some may view fathers through the lens of pain or detachment, this earthly pain need not cloud our image of God as father. He represents the perfect picture of what a father should be: he offers his children protection, provision, concern. He is never too distant to receive you, never too busy to listen to you. You cannot approach him too often. He is but a thought away from you.

Imagine. A perfect, holy God who receives sinners into his presence. How, you ask, how can this be? How can we in our imperfection, dare approach a holy God? We have the right to enter his presence because we have been clothed in Christ. Apart from Christ, God is inaccessible. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. The only way to the father is through me" (Jn. 14:6).

Christ covers us with his goodness. He wraps us in his sinlessness and dresses us in his holiness.

Recently, I had an experience that brought home this point. I was invited to attend the Masters golf tournament. Now, for you non-golfers out there, let me explain that the Masters is no ordinary tournament. No ticket is more difficult to obtain than a ticket to this premier event. No sports event is harder to enter than the Masters. And getting into the locker room requires the cunning of a Mission Impossible team. The term "off limits" was created by the folks at the Masters: no one goes in except players and caddies and VIPs.

I should know because I tried to get in. I wanted to walk the floors which had felt the footsteps of Bobby Jones, Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, and Ben Hogan. But I couldn't. I didn't have the credentials. I could only gaze from a distance.

But then I got my coveralls.

You see, on the day before the tournament, the pros play in a par-three round. The golfer gives his caddy the afternoon off and invites a friend to take his place. My friend, golf pro Scott Simpson, invited me to be his caddy. I've never been more honored to lug a bag in my life. I went to the caddy shack and picked up my official caddy hat and put on the required white coveralls. Then, after the round I carried the bag up to the locker room, right past the doorway where earlier I had been denied entrance.

I entered the locker room and walked around like I was born to be there. I looked in the mirrors where the pros look. I sat in front of the lockers where the great ones have sat. I roamed at leisure, for

now I was wearing the clothes of a caddy. Like the non-pro wearing caddy clothes when we come to Christ, we change clothing. *For through faith you are all sons of God in union with Christ Jesus. Baptized into union with him, you have all put on Christ as a garment* (Gal. 3:27).

We are wrapped up in Christ, completely reclothed and covered. We can enter the presence of God without question. Remember the words of Isaiah:

*The Lord makes me very happy. All that I am rejoices in my God. He has covered me with the clothes of salvation and wrapped me with a coat of goodness, like a bridegroom, dressed for his wedding, like a bride dressed in jewels* (Is. 61:10-11).

Entering God's presence. When the children of the king come into the throne room, a holy moment takes place. Entering his presence through prayer is not a rare event on a holy calendar. It's not a singular ceremony reserved for some special group. Nor is it a spectacular episode for the history books. Instead, it is moment by moment access to a Holy God.

And, though lofty in privilege, it's common in availability. It is the lifelong chance of a lifetime.

## Meeting the King

*But without faith it is impossible to please him: he that comes must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him* (Heb. 11:6).

Suppose you are vacationing in a remote area, far removed from population. Your child becomes ill, urgently needing care. You and your spouse load the child in the car and race to the nearest village. There you are told of three medical caregivers, all three living next to each other. You drive to the street, locate the first physician and knock on the door.

No one answers. You knock again and no one answers. Only after knocking a third time, do you notice a sign over the doorway which reads, "No one lives here." So, you run back to your car and inform your mate, "The place is empty."

"Go next door," you are instructed and so you do.

This time there is an answer to your knock. An old man with a kind face listens to your problem and answers, "I wish I could help you. There was a day when I could. But I can't now. I need care myself. In fact, if you have time, I need someone to come and prepare my meal. Also, if you could spare a few dollars, I'm a bit short on cash. . ."

Realizing your child won't be helped here, you apologize mid-sentence to the gentleman and leave, shouting to the car as you run, "Someone is here, but he can't help."

Your child is worsening by the minute and you have only one more option. You run to the third house. This time an able-looking professional opens the door. "How may I help?" he asks. You explain that your child is ill and needs immediate care. "Quickly, bring the child to me," he urges.

"Are you able to help?"

"I am."

"Are you willing to help?"

"I am."

He is there and he is willing to help. That's all you know. That's all you need to know. You don't need to know his birthplace, his Social Security number or his life story — all you need is his existence and availability, his presence and his willingness. He is there and he is good. Those two facts are enough to take you to his presence.

Those same two facts are enough to take you to the presence of God. *The man who approaches God must have faith in two things, first, that God exists and secondly that God rewards those who search for him.* (Heb. 11:6 Phillips). What is required? A conviction that God is and conviction that God is good. Those who would come to God must believe that God is real and God is responsive. These convictions form the foundation of prayer. These convictions are found in one word in the first sentence of our Lord's prayer.

*What is the word?* I'll give you a hint. You just read it. *Where is it?* You just read it. *Is it in this sentence?* It is. It's in the answer I just gave. *Come on, Max, is this a joke?* Would I kid you? (By the way the word was in your question.) See it?

Is. *Our father who is in heaven.*

God *is*. Not God was. Nor God will be. Not God could be or should be, but God is. He is. The God of the present tense.

That's all you need to know to come to God. More is helpful but not necessary. More can come later, but none can come earlier. Begin with the reality and the responsiveness of God. Remember the condition described in Hebrews? If you believe there is a living God, (he is) and you believe there is a loving God, (he rewards those who seek him,) then you have faith. And you are welcome in his presence.

The foundation of his kingdom is not built on you, but on him. The key question is not "Who am I?" but rather "Who is God?"

I write these words on an airplane. A late airplane. An airplane different from the one I was originally assigned. My first flight was cancelled for mechanical difficulty. I and a few dozen not-so-happy campers were down-loaded onto another plane. As we checked into the new flight, I heard many of my passengers ask, is this plane ok? Any mechanical flaws with this 747? We were full of questions about the plane's

ability to fly, but the attendant had no questions about our ability to do the same.

Not once were we asked, "How about you? Can you fly? Can you flap your arms and get airborne?" Bizarre questions. My ability to fly is not important. My strength is immaterial. I'm counting on the plane to get me home, hence I inquire as to its strength.

Need I make the connection? Your achievements, however noble, are not important. Your credentials, as remarkable as they may be, are of no concern. God is the force behind this journey. His strength is the key factor. Focus not on your strength, but his. Occupy yourself with the nature of God, not the size of your bicep.

That's what Moses did. Or at least that's what God told Moses to do. Remember the conversation at the burning bush? The tone was set in the first sentence. *Take off your sandals because you are standing on holy ground* (Ex. 3:5). Immediately the roles are defined. God is holy. Approaching him on even a quarter

inch of leather is too pompous. With those eleven words Moses is enrolled in a class on God. No time is spent convincing Moses what Moses can do. Much time is spent explaining to Moses what God can do.

We tend to do the opposite. Our approach would be to explain to Moses how he is ideally suited to return to Egypt. (Who better understands the culture than a former prince?) Then we'd remind Moses how perfect he is for wilderness travel. (Who knows the desert better than a shepherd?) We'd spend much time reviewing with Moses his resume and strengths. (Come on Moses, you can do it. Give it a try.)

God doesn't. The strength of Moses is never considered. No pep talk is given, no pats on the backs are offered. Not one word is given to recruit Moses. But many words are given that reveal God. The strength of Moses is not the issue. The strength of God is.

Let's re-read that last phrase replacing the name of Moses with your name. The strength of \_\_\_\_\_ is not the issue. The strength of God is. You aren't the force behind the plane nor the mortar within the foundation: God is. I know that you understand that statement, but do you accept it in your heart? Would you like to? Let me put down my inspirational pen and pick up my instructional pen. Allow me to get very practical with you and show you how you can have a deeper trust in God's character.

One of the most encouraging ways to study God is to study his names. The study of the names of God is no brief reading. After all there are dozens of them in scripture. But if you want a place to begin, start with some of the compound names of God in the Old Testament. Each of them reveals a different aspect of God's character.

Maybe you are wondering how a study of the names of God can help you trust God. Let me explain. Imagine that you and I are having a conversation in 1978. You approach me on the college campus where I was a student and ask, "Do you know Denalyn Preston?" I would have answered, "Let me think. Oh, I know Denalyn. She's an acquaintance of mine. She's that cute girl who likes to ride bikes and wear overalls to class." That's all I knew about her.

But go forward a year. Now we are in Miami, Florida, where I am a minister and Denalyn is a school teacher attending the church I serve. "Do you know Denalyn Preston?" "Of course, I do. She's a friend. I see her every Sunday."

Ask me again a year later, "Denalyn Preston? Sure I know her. She can't take her eyes off me." (Just kidding, honey.)

Fast forward twelve months. "Who doesn't know Denalyn Preston?" I would answer. "You think she might be willing to go out on a date with me?"

Six months later, "Of course I know her; I can't quit thinking about her. We're going out again next week."

Two months later, "Do I know Denalyn Preston? I'm going to marry her next August!"

Now it's August of 1981. "Do I know Denalyn Preston? No, but I know Denalyn Lucado; she's my wife. And quit bugging us, we're on our honeymoon."

In three years my relationship with Denalyn changed. And with each change came a new name. She went from "acquaintance", to "friend", to "eye-popping beauty" to "date" to "fiancee" and "wife." Of course the names have only continued. Now she is "confidante," "mother of my children," "life-long partner," "boss" (oops, just kidding again.) The more I know her the more names I give her.

The same happened in the Bible. The more God's people came to know him, the more names they gave him. Initially God was known as *Elohim*. "In the beginning God (*Elohim*) created. . ." (Gen. 1:1). The Hebrew word "*Elohim*" carries with it the meaning "strong one or creator." Therefore when we call God *Elohim*, we refer to his strength or omnipotence. *Elohim* appears 31 times in the first chapter of Genesis

because that is where we see his creative power.

As God revealed himself to his children, however, they saw him as more than a mighty force. They saw him as a loving creator who met them at every crossroad of their lives.

Jacob, for example, came to see God as *Jehovah Roi*; a caring shepherd. “Like a shepherd,” Jacob told his family, “God has led me all my life” (Gen. 48:15).

The phrase is surely a compliment to God, for Jacob was less than a cooperative sheep. Twice he tricked his brother, at least once he suckered his blind father, he out-crossed his double-crossing father-in-law by conning him out of his livestock and then, when the fellow wasn’t looking, made like a Colt out of Baltimore in the middle of the night sneaking off with anything that wasn’t nailed down.

Jacob was never a candidate for the best-behaved sheep award, but God never forgot him. Gave him food in the famine, gave him forgiveness in his failures, gave him faith in his final years. Ask Jacob to describe God in a word, his word was *Jehovah Roi* — the caring shepherd.

Abraham had another word for God: *Jehovah-jireh*. “The Lord who provides.” Abraham came by the name honestly. It all began when Abraham heard the call to go to the land of Canaan and so he went. God promised to make him the father of the nations and he believed. But that was before Lot took the best land. That was before the king of Egypt took his wife. That was before he found out that he, the father of the nations, was married to a barren wife. But then Lot ended up in Sodom and Gomorrah, the Pharaoh ended up returning Sara, and Abraham ended up bouncing his first-born on his hundred-year-old bony knees. Abraham learned that God provides. But even Abraham must have shaken his head when God asked him to sacrifice his own son on Mt. Moriah.

Up the mountain they went. “Where is the lamb we will burn as a sacrifice?” (Gen. 22:7) his son asked. One wonders how the words made it past the lump in Abraham’s throat, “God will give us the lamb for the sacrifice, my son” (Vs. 8). *Jehovah-jireh*: the Lord will provide. Abraham tied up his son and placed him on the altar and raised the knife and the angel stayed his hand. Abraham had proven his faith. He heard a rustling in the thicket and saw a ram caught in a bush by his horns. He offered it as an offering and gave the mountain a name: *Jehovah-jireh* — The Lord Provides.

And then there is Gideon. The Lord came to Gideon and told him he was to lead his people in victory over the Midianites. That’s like God telling a housewife to stand up to her abusive husband; or a high school student to take on drug peddlers or a preacher to preach the truth to the fat and sassy. “Y-y-you b-b-better get somebody else,” we stammer. But then God reminds us that he knows we can’t but he can and to prove it, he gives a wonderful gift, peace. He brings a spirit of peace. A peace before the storm. A peace beyond logic, or as Paul described it, “A peace which passes understanding.” He gave it to David after he showed him Goliath, he gave it to Saul after he showed him the gospel, and he gave it to Jesus after he showed him the cross. And he gave it to Gideon. So Gideon, in turn gave the name to God. He built an altar and named it “*Jehovah-Shalom*” The Lord is peace. (Judges 6:24)

God the Creator, God the Caring Shepherd, God the Provider, Lord of Peace. Just some of the names that help us understand the God Who Is.

God is the God who always is. I am who I am, he says.

Who is the one who created the world? God is.

Who is the one who provides the needs of his children? God is.

Who is the one who saves his people? God is.

Who is the one who rewards those that diligently seek him? God is.

## In the Presence of Holiness

Your neighbor really wants you to read this chapter. No kidding. In fact, he's sighing a big sigh of relief. Why? Because he knows that harmony begins with understanding and that understanding starts with information. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to give you some information about your neighbor.

Of course, when we say "neighbor" we're using the broad definition of the word. Neighbors aren't just the folks next door or around the corner. Your neighbor is anybody you meet on life's journey. That's the lesson Jesus gave when he told the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). You remember the story of a man who was beaten and robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. . . as he lay dying, two religious leaders came by, deciding not to stop and help. The fellow in the ditch might have died had it not been for a compassionate traveler who carried him to the next city, secured medical help, and paid the costs. Not only is this parable a compelling story, it is God's clear definition of a neighbor: anyone you meet on the road of life. So, let's visit our neighbors: could be your date, your mate, or the girl at the gate. It's the cute guy on the elevator and the cranky receptionist on the third floor. It's the friend who nurtures you, the forgetful senior citizen, and the homeless guy who carries his possessions in a paper sack. All of them are your neighbors, and when we enter the presence of God through prayer, they are present as well. Prayer is the pathway for all God's children, and our neighbors gather with us in the throne room.

Let's try to understand these neighbors: why your spouse is moody, why your employee is Jumpy or why your teenager acts like, well, a teenager. They share some common denominators that Jesus listed in his model prayer. "Our Father" (we are all children in need of a father), "our daily bread" (we are all beggars in need of bread), "our debts" (we are all sinners in need of grace), "deliver us from temptation" (we are all strugglers in need of strength).

In one way, we are much like Ruth and Verena Cady. Since their birth in 1984, they have shared much. Like most twins, they have shared a bike, a bed, a room, and toys. They've shared meals, stories, TV shows, and birthdays. They shared the same womb before they were born and the same room after they were born. But the bond between Ruthie and Verena goes even further. They share more than toys and treats. They share a heart.

Their bodies are fused from the sternum to the waist. Though they have separate nervous systems and distinct personalities, they are sustained by the same three-chambered heart. Neither girl could survive without the other. Neither would want to survive without the other. With separation not an option, cooperation became an obligation.

They have learned to live together as neighbors. Take walking for example. When they began to attempt toddling on their own, they developed their own style. Instead of taking turns leading each other, they began to walk sideways, as if in a dance. And they dance in the same direction.

They've learned to compensate for each other's weaknesses. Verena loves to eat. But Ruthie finds sitting at the table too dull. Ruthie may eat only a half cup of fruit a day, but that is not a concern, for her sister will eat enough for both. They've learned to tolerate consequences for which they are not responsible. When one girl is disciplined by a period in "timeout" the innocent party tags along.

The twins have many lessons to teach us. Though we may claim to be autonomous, we aren't. Though we may claim to be independent, no one is. Like the sisters, we are dependent on each other. Oh, we don't eat out of the same plate, but we are sustained by the same earth. We don't sleep in the same bed, but we sleep under the same sky. We don't share one heart. (Or do we: don't we share the same hope for eternity? Don't we have a mutual hunger to be loved and saved?) And, like the twins, don't we share the same Father?

Perhaps that's why the model prayer isn't addressed to "my father," or "your father," but "OUR Father." "Our Father who is in heaven."

And, because he is father to all, his house has many rooms. The rooms are large and the hallway is busy. As you pass through the halls, you brush shoulders with Ethiopian tribesmen and Russian peasants and Norwegian farmers and any other soul who has looked into the skies and prayed, "Our Father." Though you may not know them and though you may not understand them, you are linked to them by virtue of a mutual father.



Why is it important to remember this community? It's important because before you talk to Him, he wants you to be at peace with Them. Remember his command earlier in the Sermon on the Mount? "When you offer your gift to God at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave a gift there at the altar. Go and make peace with that person, then come and offer your gift." (Mt. 5:23-24).

Jesus envisions a person going to worship. He sees that the person has a gift to give. Perhaps it's a tithe, or a song, or an act of service. On the way to offer the gift, however, the person remembers an unresolved conflict. He thinks of a neighbor he has offended. The worshiper has nothing against the person, mind you, but the person has something against the worshiper. Jesus' instructions are clear: Before you come to my house, go to his house. Before you give me a gift, gift him an apology. Before you give me a tithe, give your neighbor an olive branch. Harmony is a cherished ideal in God's house.

Isn't it in yours? You parents understand this point. A couple of your children are in a cold war. They won't speak to each other, but one decides to speak to you. He hugs your neck and says, "You're a good Mom." Now, as much as you welcome the compliment, you want his attention focused on resolving the conflict. "The greatest compliment you can give me is to make up with your big sister."

God is a parent who wants only the same from his children. Can you imagine what the world would be like if we took this command seriously? What if we determined to be at peace before we sat in the pews? The phone lines would start humming on Saturday night.. . "Sorry to call so late, but tomorrow I want to worship with a clean conscience and, well, I know I was rude to you this week. Could we talk about it?"

You know, it's hard to deeply worship your father when you've been unkind to his children or when you don't like his kids. In fact, the apostle John says, it is impossible to worship in this state of mind. "If people say they love God, but hate their brothers and sisters, they are liars. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have never seen" (1 Jn. 4:20).

Of course, you cannot control the response of your neighbor to your gesture of peace. You may do everything possible to make amends, but still be rejected. But at least, we must do everything possible. As Paul urges, "Do your best to live in peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18).

A good place to start is by reminding yourself that you and your neighbor have much in common: the same hopes, the same fears, similar pain, similar joys. Remind yourself that we are all children in need of a father.

When my oldest daughter turned twelve, I took her to Israel. One afternoon, as we were exiting Jerusalem's Jaffa Gate, we found ourselves behind an Orthodox Jewish father and his three small girls. One of the daughters had fallen a few steps behind, and became enmeshed in the crowd. "Abba," she called out to him. The father stopped, searched, and found the missing child. He extended his hand, she took it, and the family continued on down the street. He held her hand tightly in his as they waited for the light to change at the corner. From then on, the little girl walked through the busy intersection without fear. She was holding the hand of her "Abba."

When Jesus used the term "abba" in his model prayer, he spoke the tenderest expression found in Hebrew for a child to use when calling his father. Not a distant, unapproachable father, but an "abba" whose hand holds ours, whose arms carry us, whose heart weeps when we weep. It's in this common need for "abba" that we find our sense of community. Aren't we all needing "abba"? One who will come when we call, extend his hand when we feel afraid, and guide us when we trust.

Sometimes we think we've outgrown the Father's hand or we're too mature to need his help. That may be where your neighbor is right now. He may have struggles that only God can understand, that only God can remedy. That may be where your neighbor is right now. He may be hard to like or difficult to live with. But, be patient, just as you would want him to be patient with you.

It won't be long before he looks up and realizes he is on a busy street with no clue how to get home. It could be that he, like the little girl, will say, "Abba." And it could be that you'll be there to show him the father's hand.

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